
Two Spirit in Human Behavior

Dated as far back as the sixteenth century, letters composed by European Christian settlers were detailed with descriptions of gender-crossing individuals among indigenous Americans. Although modern anthropologists would consider these depictions to be a direct form of ethnocentric bias because of their etic, or observer perspective, these primary sources offer insight into the development of modern day Native American Two-Spirits.

Many of these historical sources concerning traditional native populations in North America illustrate depictions of individuals who cross gender lines in terms of dress, occupations, and other socially constructed roles. Including the historical accounts of two-spirit individuals, most of the descriptions are concerned with gender fluid men, whereas females are less frequently mentioned. Equally as controversial as it is intriguing, the concept of a third gender has drawn attention for centuries and doesn't seem to be vanishing from human curiosity.

The phrase "two-spirit" can be traced to the early nineteen-nineties, when thirteen men, women and transgender people from various tribes gathered together in Winnipeg, Canada for an annual inter-tribal Native American / First Nations gay / lesbian convention. The term itself stems from the Ojibwe phrase "niizh manidoowag", which literally translates to "two-spirited". This English term is used to describe the Indigenous North Americans who fulfil a variety of gender roles traditionally found in Native American and Canadian First Nations Indigenous groups.

"Two-spirit" can also be used in a more abstract manner, indicating the presence of two contrasting human spirits, such as a Warrior and Clan Mother- although it is typically associated with gender role oriented tasks such as wearing the clothing and performing work associated with both men and women. Despite the recent wide-spread acceptance of the term "two-spirit", this non-binary concept was not always regarded as such. In the early twentieth century, "beardache" was the socially accepted anthropological term for alternative gender roles in Native American culture.

"Beardache" was initially used to classify a young captive or slave (male or female slaves) and was then thought to be introduced into western Europe through Muslim influence in Spain. The label then took on similar variations in other languages during the Renaissance- bardascia and bardasso in Italian, baradje in Spanish, and berdache in French. In early English, "beardache" was used somewhat synonymously with "catamite"- or the younger partner in an age gap homosexual relationship. With the passage of time, "beardache" and its several variations remained a general term for male homosexuality until the nineteenth century, where its use in Europe almost disappeared completely.

The use of the phrase in North America, however, carries a significantly different meaning. It became a pidgin term used by European Americans and natives who lived in areas settled by the French. An important anthropological use of this term was in ethnologist James Owen Dorsey's 1890 study of Siouan cults. Dorsey described the term as a French-Canadian frontier term; this further supports the argument that Native American tribes already constructed their own labels for this third gender.

Most recently, in nineteen ninety-three, a group of natives and anthropologists proposed a guideline that officially acknowledged that the term 'beardache' "has its origins in Western thought and languages". The guidelines request that scholars cease the use of these terms and encourages the use of tribally specific language for multiple gender identities or "two-spirit" individuals. Two-spirit was also classified as an inappropriate label for contemporary gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identifying individuals. "Claiming the role of Two-Spirit is to take up the spiritual responsibility that role traditionally had".

Two-spirit roles were one of the most commonly shared features of North American tribal societies. The concept has been documented across every region of the continent, every major language group and tribe. Will Roscoe, an American scholar, author and a close alliance to the group Gay American Indians (GAI) conducted research on the commonality of two-spirit individuals. Because of the mass destruction caused by European colonization, Roscoe was able to recognize that the absolute frequency of two-spirit people is virtually unknown to anthropologists. Every tribe had its own term to classify two-spirits. In the Crow tribe, two-spirits were called bote; in the Lakota tribe, winkte; in the Navajo; nadleehi.

However, not all two-spirit terms translate literally. For example, the Navajo's term "nadleehi" roughly translates to "the one is changing"; this translation clearly distinguishes that the individual being referred to is in a constant state of transformation-they are never completely male or female. Roscoe found that two-spirits have been documented in over one hundred thirty different tribes (Tribal institute). Additionally, Roscoe concluded that the number of tribes that rejected such non-binary gender roles is very small. Some native informants and outside observers have denied being a two-spirit identifying individual to avoid condemnation from non-native outsiders. "

If you don't lose your language, start practicing Christianity, cut your hair, learn to speak English, you will die-that's the choice so many native people were given" explained Roger Kuhn, a board member of the Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits and a member of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians. "Assimilation means you lose a lot of your identity" (Davis-Young). Although traditional research has not been conducted to support these claims of two-spirit rejection, the two-spirit population still proves to be an active aspect of native American culture and identity despite the impacts of colonization.

Within Native American society, two-spirits have held distinct yet flexible gender and social roles in their tribes for generations. Native people believe a person can be born with both male and female spirits, and it is a direct manifestation of the sacred. There are often stereotypes about Native Americans that criticize their culture for being "ancient". Interviewed by the Washington Post about such negative stereotypes, assistant professor of American studies and member of the Colville Nation, Chris Finley, discussed this further. Finley explains that Europeans brought patriarchal societal traditions with them, and that deep within those gender roles were "the European's understandings of land ownership and inheritance" (Davis-Young).

Considered a diverse and separate gender that combines and balances both male and female qualities, these individuals experience an entirely different world than binary gender identifying individuals. Because of this, they are viewed by other tribe members as extraordinary and possessing sacred qualities. On the contrary, outsiders such as the Europeans settlers had never seen anything like a two-spirit and instead viewed such diverse traits to be related to homosexuality for confirming typically "feminine" chores.

But in most tribes, native individuals who identify as two-spirit even identified as such in childhood based upon personal skills and interest, not sexual orientation. Biologically male two-spirit people kept the house, wove textiles and baskets, created ceramics and leather goods and wore female clothing. For example, the Zuni Ihamana Tribe's two-spirit individuals were especially admired for their skills in artistry (basket weaving, ceramics, etc.), cooking and teaching/mediating.

Although these tasks are typically performed by female figures, participating in any of these chores did not exclude the men from traditionally male roles, such as being a warrior or hunting. Similarly, the two-spirit of the Lakota tribe believed that male-bodied individuals were a gift of prophecy. Members of their tribe seek them out for matchmaking, name conferring and prophesying; and for their expertise as medicine men, shamans, chiefs and ceremony officials. Female two-spirits, although not nearly as common, played the traditional role of a man in doing activities like horseback riding, hunting, warfare and healing while dressed as man.

Before European contact, Native American tribes had their own terms for those regarded as two-spirit. These individuals were accepted and admired for their abilities and contributions to their populations. There was no judgment based upon the gender or sexuality of another human being—a person was valued because of their character and tribal contributions. Native American cultures have been proven to be among some of the most resilient and adaptable in the world. From the peak of colonization and assimilation to today's fight for the equality and the advancements of rights, Native people deserve to be heard and treated as human, no matter how they identify.